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ABSTRACT

For one freshman composition instructor, the method that has brought more students out of their shells in her classes over the past three years is group conferencing. Adapted from compositionist Donald Murray's method of conferencing with individual students to discuss their papers, group conferencing gives students the opportunity to discuss their intentions in their writing and get feedback immediately rather than attempting to "translate" the instructor's comments on a graded paper in hopes of revising it to the instructor's liking. The semester begins with a class discussion about the four techniques for criticism, and then the Student Essay Sheet is introduced. The evaluation sheet gives students the opportunity to read and think about the other two group members' papers before they come to a conference. In conference, students react to something they have thought about, so reactions are not superficial. Students cover items in the conference that the instructor does not need to deal with, and the instructor can get to the deeper revision issues in the paper. Student learning increases in group conference, and direct benefits for the students include immediate gratification of having a reaction to work and the opportunity to know the professor and the other students better in a casual environment. A student essay evaluation sheet is attached. (NKA)

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by Jennifer Rideout Golz

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Group Conferencing Strategies and Academic Discourse: Working with Students in Freshman Composition

In high school, students know one another. They know their boundaries. However, in college, students come together from all over the country, all over the world. The tendency, during freshman year, is for students to be hesitant to speak out in class since their classmates are unfamiliar faces and students tend to be unsure of their knowledge as compared to those around them. Furthermore, of all the classes freshmen take, composition is a requirement. Therefore, student enthusiasm may not be at its highest. So, as compositionists, we use collaborative exercises such as writing and sharing writings in groups, peer reviews and more. However, the one method that has brought more students out of their shells in my classes over the past three years is group conferencing.

Adapted from compositionist Donald Murray's method of conferencing with individual students to discuss their papers, conferencing individually or with groups gives students the opportunity to discuss their intentions in their writing and get feedback immediately rather than attempting to "translate" the instructor's comments on a graded paper in hopes of revising it to the instructor's liking. Traditional grading involves assumptions -- (1) the assumption that the instructor knows what the student intended when writing the paper and therefore makes comments about the paper with that in mind and (2) the assumption that

the student will know what the instructor's comments mean and be able to make those changes, whether the student is in agreement or not. Traditional grading operates under the premise that the student is emotionally detached from the work generated. However, this simply is not the case with writing. Intensely personal, writing needs to be shared by the writer and responded to sensitively and with the opportunity for the writer to retain ownership of his or her work. In the case of group conferencing, clearly the student owns the writing since he or she has the opportunity to discuss his or her work and potential revisions, rather than being told to unquestioningly make changes that might make sense only to the instructor.

We start the semester with a class discussion about the techniques for criticism: (1) What would you want to hear from another person about your paper? (2) What words would we want to use in critiquing and suggestions? (3) What words would you not want to hear or read about your work? (4) How can we formulate revision suggestions that the writer will want to pursue? Then the Student Essay Evaluation Sheet is introduced (see attachment). The evaluation sheet gives students the opportunity to read and think about the other two group members' papers before they come to conference. In conference, students react to something they've thought about, so reactions are not simply superficial. Students cover items in the conference that the instructor doesn't need to deal with, and the instructor can then get to the deeper revision issues in the paper. The evaluation sheet makes the students prepare (since there are points attached to Student Evaluation Sheet completion) and be in "conference mood" -- leading to more productive conferencing.

Illustrating group conferencing through scenario seems most clear: Group conferences take place when the final draft of an essay comes due. The class period before the due date, students sign up for conferences and make plans to exchange their final drafts in class or outside of class before the conference. Students receive the evaluation sheet during class prior to the conferences and complete it before conference. One class meeting is cancelled and students meet in groups of three for forty-five minutes each in the instructor's office. Meeting in this location familiarizes them with the location and encourages students to return for consultations. At conference time, students arrive at the instructor's office and determine who will read his or her paper first. The student about to read may say a few words about the essay (perhaps what he or she would like those in the session to listen for), then reads the essay. The instructor always allows the students to comment first, beginning with "What do you like about this paper?" then moving on to "What would you do next if this were your paper to revise?" Students use their answers on the evaluation sheet to aid them in responding. This is especially effective in bringing shy students into the conversation. Once all comments are made, the group moves on to the next reader, and then to the next reader.

Not having read the papers prior to the conference, the instructor makes more oral comments in this method, but oral comments give the responsibility for

revision to the student. Some written comments are made by the instructor as the student reads the paper, but mainly the medium is discussion with the student pertaining to revision. Discussion rather than comments encourages students to talk about their work, which further embeds their attachment to their work and thus their desire for the work to best represent them in conference. Final drafts are much better when students know they will have to read them aloud in conference.

Apprehensive at first about reading and discussing each other's work, students soon find that gaining the opinions of three people creates a better paper than receiving the opinion of only one. Also, student learning increases in group conference in three ways: (1) by reading their own papers and hearing where they stop or slow down because of awkward wording or words left out, (2) by discussing their papers which gives the students ideas for writing, and (3) by building their vocabulary and understanding of writing as they give advice to one another based on what they learn from discussions with each essay over the semester. Direct benefits for the students include: (1) immediate gratification of having a reaction to their work rather than having to wait for the instructor to grade it and return it, (2) the opportunity to know the professor better in a casual environment, and (3) the opportunity to get to know members of their class as well as from other sections (since the same students aren't together at every conference).

The outcomes of group conferencing are two-fold. As they learn in class workshops and gain terminology used in composition, students bring their ideas to the conference table to help each other, and they have more confidence in expressing their ideas. Back in the classroom after the conferences, students appear to have formed more cohesive groups since they have interacted in the more intimate conference setting with various students from class and thus are more willing to move among groups with comfort. Student familiarity makes class discussions more profitable. They teach each other a lot more during peer reviews, leaving the instructor to deal with the bigger issues in their writing. And, important for initiating students into the collegiate world, students learn planning and responsibility for their own work. By the end of the semester, students who were apprehensive about conferencing have mostly determined that their work has improved as a result of the conferences, with only about two students per class, on average, feeling group conferencing didn't help them much.

The most valuable aspect of group conferencing is difficult to pinpoint. Students get to know one another on a deeper level making workshops, peer reviews and class discussion more profitable. Most of all, students invest more of themselves into their writing with group conferencing, knowing they will read this work aloud in such an intimate setting. The improvement in the quality of final

drafts makes group conferencing most worthwhile. From the start of the semester to the end, improvement in student writing through group conferencing and further revision far outweighs any other method this instructor has tried.

Student Essay Evaluation Sheet
Mrs. Jennifer Rideout Golz –
Tennessee Technological University – English Department

Name of Evaluator:_____
Name of Author:_____
Date:_____

Instructions: Read the two essays from your group conference session carefully. Read each one twice before answering the following questions. Go back and read the essay assignment carefully to refresh your memory with its requirements. You may add comments within the essay next to material that needs further explanation.

1. Discuss what aspects of the essay you liked and thought were particularly strong.

2. Discuss what aspects of the essay you would change if this were your essay (Remember: positive, constructive criticism that YOU would want to read about your own paper).

3. What do you understand this essay to be communicating to you? What needs clarification/explanation/expansion?

4. Discuss the essay's style and organization. Where does/doesn't the essay stay on track? Where does/doesn't it hold your interest? Underline with a jagged line areas that are wordy or seem awkward.

5. Use this space to write additional comments to assist the author in further revision.